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SUBJECT: RUSSIA'S ELITIST VICTORY DAY CELEBRATIONS

11. (SBU) Summary: Russia on May 9 celebrated the sixty-third anniversary of the end of World War II with a parade on Red Square that featured approximately 8,000 soldiers and 100 military vehicles. For the first time since 1990, the parade showcased military hardware such as empty ballistic missile canisters, tanks, and a flyover of military aircraft. Dmitriy Medvedev marked the occasion with a speech that praised the veterans of World War II, asserted Russia's strength, and implicitly criticized the West. The parade itself was an elitist affair, with access to Red Square restricted. The majority of Russians either viewed the parade on TV or watched the military hardware drive by after it completed the official parade. Reactions to the parade were universally positive, with young people enjoying the spectacle and older people remembering what they perceived to be "better days." After the parade, the Communist Party held a rally that criticized the current Russian government. End Summary.

Medvedev Praises Russia's Strength, Criticizes The West

12. (U) With Prime Minister Putin standing alongside, Medvedev marked the sixty-third anniversary of the defeat of Nazi Germany with a speech that sang the praises of World War II veterans and proclaimed that the Russian military was "growing stronger, like Russia itself." Victory Day was a holiday, he said, to honor World War II veterans who realized that the "real purpose of the military was to provide reliable defense for the Motherland." Medvedev thanked the veterans for not allowing Russia to "be brought to its knees," and for defending Russia's sovereignty and independence.

13. (SBU) While Medvedev avoided the bellicose rhetoric of his predecessor, who at last year's parade likened the U.S. to Nazi Germany, he did issue veiled warnings to and criticisms of the United States and its allies. Medvedev stated that wars did not simply happen, but rather the "flames of conflict are lit by those who put their own irresponsible ambitions above the interests of whole countries and continents." In an apparent reference to Kosovo (and not, for instance, Georgia), Medvedev argued that countries must not ignore international law, interfere with the affairs of other countries, and "attempt to revise borders."

Parade Details

14. (U) Media reports indicated over 8,000 troops and, for the first time since 1990, 100 military vehicles paraded across Red Square's specially-reinforced cobble streets. According to the newspaper Kommersant, nearby subway tunnels were even reinforced so they would not collapse. In addition to tanks and armored personnel carriers, the parade also featured empty Topol-M canisters (no nuclear missiles) and a flyover of Russian military aircraft. Media reports indicate that twelve air force planes were used to seed the clouds throughout the area to ensure good weather.

15. (SBU) As if to underscore the tandem nature of the Putin-Medvedev relationship, Putin stood beside Medvedev as the soldiers and equipment passed the reviewing stand. The reviewing stand itself obscured Lenin's Tomb, and perhaps highlighted the ambivalent attitude of the current administration toward the parade: obscuring Lenin's Tomb distanced Putin and Medvedev from the Soviet past, while the parade itself harkened back to the military power the USSR possessed.

16. (U) After the parade, many people gathered at Moscow's Victory Park to enjoy concerts and spend time with their families. Moscow Mayor Yuriy Luzhkov gave a speech in which he praised the bravery of World War II veterans. Their sacrifice, he said, served as an example to future generations. "Russians are a peaceful people," he said, but are always ready to serve their country during times of need.

Separating The Cutlets From The Flies

17. (SBU) Attendance at the formal parade through Red Square was by invitation only. Average Russians who wanted to see their country's military might on display had to either content themselves by viewing the parade on television, or by standing along the Moscow streets near Red Square and watching the equipment roll by after the parade. An older woman explained that "in our country there are two groups, the cutlets and the flies. Russia's leaders are the cutlets, and we are the flies." As if to drive home the point, city street sweepers were used to squirt water at people who did not remain on the sidewalk.

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Reactions From The People

18. (U) The enthusiastic crowds cheered the tanks and other equipment. The most enthusiastic response was generated by the empty Topol-M ballistic missile canisters. Many young people simply described the parade as "cool," and said they had never seen such firepower in the streets of Moscow before. Many older Russians said the parade gave them hope and reminded them of "better times." Some vendors sold pictures of Stalin, although the only person PolOff observed buying a Stalin portrait sheepishly said she was no fan of the deceased dictator and had no intention of displaying the picture in her apartment.

19. (U) Local radio talk shows have been more critical, with commentators and callers alike questioning the rationale of the parade. Some commentators questioned the need for such a spectacle when, for many Russian youth, the idea of military service evokes fear and derision rather than patriotic fervor. Others pointed out that the parade disrupted both street and subway traffic for the entire day, with major roads closed long after the parade ended.

Communists Stage Protest

110. (U) Members of the Communist Party were also on hand to watch the parade and voice their approval of this display of Russia's military strength. Many, however, criticized the Russian government as a group of "criminals" who do not truly care about World War II veterans. After the military hardware passed by, press reports estimate up to 9,000 Communists marched down Tverskaya Street to Theater Square, located near Red Square, and held a rally. Communist Party Leader Gennadiy Zyuganov reminded supporters that the equipment they had just seen was all created during Soviet times, and said no new weapons were being created.

Comment

¶11. (SBU) The Victory Day parade was the latest attempt by Russia to flex its military muscles and assert itself on the world stage. Despite the excitement that the parade generated among some, many more reforms and much more defense spending must occur before Russia poses a serious military threat.

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